

MINI ESSAY 19: LEARNING NOTE NAMES ON THE STAFF

By Dr. Julie Knerr

Because Piano Safari® is an intervallically based method, we prefer to delay the introduction of note names on the staff (other than Landmark Notes) until Piano Safari® Repertoire Book 2. Although there are many ways to introduce the names of the notes on the staff, here is the system I currently use. These steps take several months to master, working a few minutes at each lesson. The variety of activities reinforces the concepts and keeps the student's interest.

Activity 1. Velcro Board

- **Step 1.** I write the music alphabet on the whiteboard, starting on F. (I tell the student I start on F just because I want to.) **F G A B C D E F G A B C D E**
- **Step 2.** The student plays this on the piano and says the letter names.
- **Step 3.** We erase every other letter on the whiteboard, until we get **F A C E G B D**.
- **Step 4.** We play this on the piano, noting that the intervals are 3rds, and that we are skipping a white key each time. So this new alphabet of **F A C E G B D** is called the **Skips Alphabet**.
- **Step 5.** "Do you see a word in the **Skips Alphabet**?" "**FACE**." "Yes, so the **Skips Alphabet** is **FACE GBD FACE GBD**" (saying the word "face"). I draw some smiley faces next to the **FACE** parts.
- **Step 6.** I tell the student that we can use the **Skips Alphabet** to learn the notes on the staff. I have a **Velcro Board** I created that has removable Velcro letters.



The green letters are spaces. The student has to remember that the bottom space in bass clef is F, and then as we go up, we can use the **Skips Alphabet** all the way to the top of the treble staff. **FACE GBD FACE G...** The lines (brown) use the **Skips Alphabet** also, but start with bottom line bass clef G. **GBD FACE GBD F...**

- **Step 7.** I take the Velcro letters off the board and hand the student each green letter, beginning with bottom line F. I hand the letters to the student in an order that will make him count up **FACE GBD** in order to find the right letter. So I might hand the child the bass F, then C, A, E, G, D, etc. I mix the letters even more randomly as he becomes adept at finding the correct space.
- **Step 8.** I hand him the brown letters beginning with the bottom line G, mixing the order as I did with the green letters.
- **Step 9.** After the student becomes comfortable with putting the green letters on separately from the brown, usually after several weeks, I then mix the green and brown letters as I hand him each letter.

Activity 2: Velcro Board Matching with Note Flashcards

- **Step 10.** I next hand the student a **Note Flashcard**. He matches this note to the corresponding note on the **Velcro Board** and takes that letter off the **Velcro Board** (bottom space F in this case).



This is to be sure that the child can compare the notes spatially between the big size of the **Velcro Board** and the small size of the **Note Flashcard**. I use the *Bastien Note Flashcards*, published by Kjos, and glue paper on the backs of each to cover up the answers.



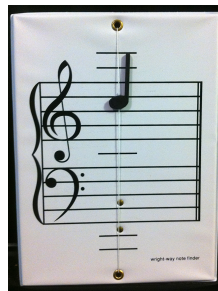
I just use the **Note Flashcards** that are on the **Velcro Board** at this point, not the leger line notes.

Activity 3: Velcro Board Matching with Whiteboard

- **Step 11.** Next I pull a Velcro note off the **Velcro Board** and have the child write the note on the whiteboard in the appropriate space or line. This provides more spatial practice.

Activity 4: Note Finder at the Piano

- **Step 12.** I use a **Note Finder**, which has a movable note that slides up and down the staff. **Note Finders** are available at most music stores. I explain that if the note is in the middle of the staff, it is in the middle of the piano, like the first floor of a house, up higher is on the 2nd floor, and down low is in the basement. I move the note up and down on the **Note Finder**, beginning on the lowest F (bottom space treble clef) and have the student tell me the name of the note and play it in the correct octave on the piano. This helps him see the notes going up by 2nd or 3rd and relate it to the keyboard.

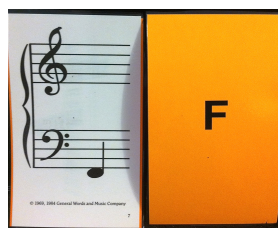


Activity 5: Flashcard Matching on the Floor

- **Step 13.** Next, I give the student a **Guide Card**, which has just F and G in bass and treble clefs.



I hand the student **Note Flashcards** one at a time, which he matches with the appropriate letter card.



Activity 6: Flashcards at the Piano

- **Step 14.** Next, I show him the flashcard, and he uses his Guide Card to find the correct letter and play it in the correct octave on the piano. When beginning this at the piano, I use all space notes first, then line notes, gradually mixing them together.
- **Step 15.** After the child becomes adept at quickly finding the notes on the staff and playing them on the piano, which can take several months, I add the leger line cards above and below the staves.
- **Step 16.** I used to send flashcards home with the student to practice, but I found that most students rarely practiced them. Now I have them use musictheory.net Note Exercises or iPhone apps like Piano Tutor, Blue Note, or Tenuto to practice their note identification at home.

I prefer this Skips Alphabet System to the old "All Cows Eat Grass" system, because with the mnemonic devices, I personally have a hard time remembering which line/space/treble/bass section corresponds to which mnemonic device. Is "All Cows Eat Grass" line bass clef, space treble clef? Where is the "All Good Boys Do Fine?" Also, these devices do not relate to the keyboard or relate the bass to the treble clef the way my current Skips Alphabet System does.